

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Testimony of

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Oversight Hearing

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Good morning, Chairwoman Allen and members of the District Council Committee on Human Services. I am Olivia Golden, director of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency. I appreciate this opportunity to present how CFSA is working to improve services to the city's abused and neglected children and to thank you for your continuing commitment to children and families. I'm grateful for your commitment over many years to vulnerable children and fragile families, for your dedication to healthy neighborhoods and communities, for your willingness to invest in change over the long haul, and for your work on the Child in Need of Protection bill. Today, you will see that your many years of hard work—along with Mayor Williams, Deputy Mayor Graham, and CFSA and its partners—are beginning to pay off in sustained, steady construction of a local safety net for children and in emerging real improvement in children's lives. While there is much more to do, the whole District community can be proud of what we have done together to transform a history of persistent failure into a pathway toward success.

A CFSA manager, who is also a 20-year veteran of the District's child welfare program, recently commented as follows: "We've made more improvements in the past two years than we did in the previous decade." It is certainly true that since CFSA returned to District control in May 2001, the pace of change within the agency has been swift and continuous.

- In the past, the District's Child Welfare program suffered from chronic understaffing and individual caseloads as high as 80 or more. Today, CFSA has 309 licensed social workers with individual caseloads no higher than 29.
- In the past, Child Welfare had little reliable management information. Today, CFSA staff at all levels review key information about case status and performance daily or weekly via computer. Court action on children's cases is downloaded to our computer system every night, and social workers come in each morning to current, accurate information on hearing dates and other requirements.
- In the past, Child Welfare had no consistent resources to help social workers decide how best to help children and families. Today, CFSA Clinical Practice professionals provide expertise in meeting the health and mental health needs of the children and families we serve.
- In the past, Child Welfare routinely placed children in group care because of a lack of services for families and few family-like placement options for children and teens. Today, CFSA is focused on placing children in family settings and has achieved dramatic

reductions in reliance on group care, especially for young children. We are also working to develop alternatives to removing children from their homes unless they cannot be safe there.

- In the past, the city did not regulate group homes for children and youth. Today, all District-based group homes serving CFSA children and teens are licensed. CFSA is also enforcing standards through denial of licenses and other consequences.

Shared Vision for Reform

Contrasting the past with the present demonstrates that our shared vision for a strong public child protective system has moved off the drawing board and is becoming reality. As you know, we collectively envision a local safety net that protects abused and neglected children, ensures that children grow up in permanent families, and promotes the well being of the most fragile children and the most vulnerable families. To get there, we're building on core values that we share with our community partners within the District and with successful child welfare reform initiatives across the country. These values center on:

- Family and community,
- cultural competence,
- quality services,
- individualized services tailored to the needs of each child and family, and
- results for children and accountability from all those who serve them.

I want to give just one example of what these values mean in practice and how they fit together into a coherent vision and plan for improving children's lives. We now place more children with kin and foster families, rather than in group homes, because we now know children develop best in families. While we have much more to do, we also seek to keep children connected to their siblings, extended families, and communities while they are in placement. Keeping these connections reduces the trauma of foster care separation; speeds children's return home, when that is possible; and links children, parents, and caregivers to a network of neighborhood support that continues after the child welfare system is no longer involved. Many of the reforms I will describe today all come together to support this strategy.

- Additional funding for the Collaboratives approved by this Committee will support more visits between children in placement and birth parents and will help families in their own communities.
- Our new initiative to ensure Facilitated Family Team Meetings when a child is removed from home will involve parents, extended family, and community at the initial point of crisis, when everyone is most likely to come forward with commitments.
- Reduced caseloads for social workers and improved information systems make it possible to hold ourselves accountable for more timely and higher quality case plans that involve all the key partners and are tailored to individual child and family needs.

The remainder of this testimony lays out how far we have come and where we are going along the path to this vision. I'll begin with an overview of progress and next steps under the Federal Court order in *LaShawn*, because it provides a clear framework and is tightly linked to the vision. Second, I'll describe major accomplishments in building the framework for improved practices and better management at CFSA and in achieving better outcomes for children. Third, I'll highlight next steps: requirements laid out by the Court and performance breakthroughs we must accomplish over the coming months to reach our shared vision for the District's children. As you will see, support from both the Mayor and this Council has been instrumental in CFSA's progress to date and remains critical to our future success.

Status of *LaShawn* Lawsuit

In addition to our collective commitment to serving abused and neglected children, the *LaShawn* lawsuit continues to act as a powerful incentive and blueprint for local child welfare reform. Several major developments have taken place over the past few months.

On August 7, the Court Monitor released her report about CFSA's performance on the Interim Implementation Plan. This plan covered the period between the end of CFSA's probation in September 2002, through negotiation of the Final Implementation Plan in March 2003. In her letter transmitting the report to the U.S. District Court, the Court Monitor wrote:

The areas of progress [CFSA] made during the Interim Implementation Plan far exceed the areas where the agency fell short [W]hile there is a tremendous amount of work that remains to be done, the agency should be pleased with the progress made to date.

From ending the Receivership to ending the Court-imposed probation to a positive report under the Interim Implementation Plan, the District has now demonstrated two full years of sustained progress in reforming child welfare—a first in this case.

While CFSA is proud of this achievement, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. On the contrary, we have redoubled our efforts to comply with the Final Implementation Plan, which the court approved in May of this year. Within CFSA, we call this document the “Best Practices Implementation Plan” because it provides a comprehensive blueprint for successful child welfare reform. It also offers an opportunity for the District to end court involvement with child welfare in 2007. While achieving these desirable ends is possible, it will not be easy because the *LaShawn* Final Implementation Plan significantly raises the bar on performance in several ways.

- First, benchmark **deadlines** occur about **every three to six months**. Our first comprehensive performance deadline occurred at the end of September, and the next is rapidly approaching on December 31. The Court Monitor is now evaluating CFSA’s progress against the September requirements. This represents the start of more regular and vastly more intensive evaluation of our performance, which will not let up until after the final deadline of December 31, 2006.
- Second, the plan requires **brisk quantitative progress** in all areas of child welfare performance, such as timeliness of initiating and completing investigations and numbers of case plans, children placed in family settings, social worker visits to children, and adoptions. While CFSA has had to demonstrate measurable progress all along,

requirements in the Final Implementation Plan are much more rigorous than those we have achieved to date.

- And third, for the first time, the Final Implementation Plan also calls for **demonstrable qualitative progress**. How well the child welfare system serves children and families is now under scrutiny. This month, for the first time, the Court Monitor, other outside reviewers, and CFSA staff have conducted quality reviews of selected cases. Each case review takes about two days and involves structured interviews with the child, birth parents, foster parents, social worker, supervisor, and other significant participants. The goal is to combine new insights about quality with what we already know about the strengths and weaknesses of our practice to shape the next round of reforms. I participated in one review and gained tremendous insight. I look forward to learning even more from the upcoming report on qualitative measures.

I've summarized these characteristics of the Final Implementation Plan to convey the District and CFSA are on the line to implement child welfare reform as never before. Deadlines in this plan are very tight because the Court and plaintiffs believe children at risk can't wait, and they are right. The challenge is great, but we have come a long way and now need to go the distance. In fact, CFSA is in a better position today to meet these challenges than we have ever been.

CFSA Achievements

CSFA has now established the foundation necessary to support improved practice and better management—and we are seeing more positive outcomes for children and families. I want to

share with you the most significant improvements in the fundamental areas of staffing, information systems, and Clinical Practice--along with indications of better outcomes for children whom CFSA must place outside their birth homes.

Staffing

I'm pleased to announce today that the District has received a major return on its FY03 investment in CFSA. By September 30, the Final Implementation Plan required CFSA to have 60 Ongoing case supervisors overseeing 300 social workers. On that date, we exceeded this goal with 63 supervisors and 309 licensed social workers. Average caseload per worker has dropped to 20, with no worker carrying more than 29 cases. In sharp contrast, just one year ago in October 2002, average caseload per worker was 34 with many workers carrying more than 60 cases. The highest individual caseload a year ago was 67.

Understaffing and high caseloads have been fundamental obstacles to improving child protective services in the District for years. While recruiting and retaining social workers is a continuous process, we have truly cleared a major hurdle by succeeding in staffing up at this early stage in the Final Implementation Plan. Without a full complement of well-trained caseworkers and manageable caseloads, CFSA would not have a prayer of meeting the plan's steady quantitative and qualitative demands. Staffing up has given all of us renewed energy and hope and has meant, in the words of more than one social worker, that "we can do the work that, as social workers, we came here to do."

While we will be reducing caseloads further in the immediate future to meet requirements of the court order and the next level of practice improvements, the reduction to date has already been an enormous step forward in accomplishing results for children. As one of our newly recruited social workers said to me last month in explaining why, after leaving CFSA about ten years ago, she decided to return, "Twenty cases are a lot different than 80 cases." While we must continue to reduce caseloads to reach the national standards the court order requires just 14 months from now, staffing up at this critical point means we have overcome one of the most entrenched and intransigent barriers to child welfare reform. We have also learned important lessons about how CFSA can become the employer of choice for social workers locally and nationally; how to use a range of recruitment techniques from traditional to innovative, such as the Internet; and how to ensure that recruits meet District licensing standards either before they start or after they have spent a brief period in a trainee role.

Information Systems

Management information is a second fundamental area in which CFSA continues to make meaningful progress. While the Court Monitor cautions that our FACES automated case management system is not yet 100 percent accurate, she does agree with our assessment that it is vastly more reliable than it has ever been. We have become an agency that constantly uses data in our day-to-day work, whether to support social workers with information, to help supervisors and managers pinpoint problems and increase accountability, or to drive policy choices. Two areas of information systems improvement especially stand out.

- FACES now offers hundreds of monthly reports about CFSA activities—from case-specific information to caseload data, numbers of group and foster homes licensed, and children available for adoption. What’s more, managers at all levels access and use this information routinely to monitor progress and identify areas that need attention. Not that long ago, managing at CFSA meant shooting in the dark. Today, managing with information, even while working to improve the data, has placed us on much firmer footing. A social work program manager recently called the FACES management reports “an effective and powerful tool” and stated that they allow her to: assess workload, identify successes and problem areas, monitor progress by unit, and enable supervisors and social workers to achieve better outcomes for children and families.
- In addition, CFSA’s FACES interface with the Family Court has increased both the speed of communication and our insight into court actions. Each night, the court downloads information from its computer system to ours. Social workers and managers can then access court information that is user-friendly. For example, each social worker has a personal calendar format showing hearing dates and report deadlines in different colors. The court also scans in orders so that social workers and managers have that information. This is significant because the court is involved in close to 65 percent of our total caseload. Cooperation between CFSA and the Family Court that made this computer interface possible has modernized this important aspect of child welfare while furthering our respective responsibilities.

Clinical Practice

While social workers are not trained to be health or mental health experts, children and families often need such services. CFSA Clinical Practice gives social workers prompt, direct access to expert advice about case-related health and mental health issues. Clinical Practice is under the direction of a doctorate-level clinical psychologist whose staff now includes an additional clinical psychologist, a pediatrician, and four registered nurses (among other professionals). Having these experts on board makes a big difference in the speed and quality of services to children. Recently, a social work program manager and 14-year veteran of District Child Welfare provided the following unsolicited story about Clinical Practice:

Based on experience, I anticipated a long, drawn-out approval process when one of our young people needed emergency medical assistance last week. Nonetheless, I went to Clinical Practice. None of the professional staff I knew was in, so I panicked, already believing I would not get any help. Then someone else in Clinical Practice directed me to a newly-hired nurse I had not yet met. Not only did this nurse contact the child's doctor, but she was also well aware of the medical terminology and procedure and had the knowledge to approve medical care for our child. I was truly impressed! Just think: Six years ago, social work staff made all the decisions; now we have professionals who know the talk and can walk the walk. This is one time in 14 years I can truly say we are indeed making progress.

Child Placement

While CFSA is striving for better results for abused and neglected children across the board, improvements stand out in placements of CFSA children who must leave their birth homes for

reasons of safety. This progress stems from implementing recommendations from experts at the Annie E. Casey Foundation along with our own initiatives over the past several months.

Improvements in child placement are now evident in five ways.

1. **CFSA is placing more children in family settings.** One of our primary goals is not only to reduce out-of-home placements but also to place in family settings more children whom we must remove from their birth homes. A year ago, CFSA had 95 children under age 12 in group care. In August of this year, that number had dropped to 51. A September 30 deadline in the Final Implementation Plan required CFSA to place 65 percent of siblings together, and at 64 percent in August, CFSA was fast closing in on that goal. The plan also requires CFSA to have no more than 50 children in facilities over 100 miles outside the District by June 2004. We had only 57 children placed in distant facilities in August 2003.
2. **CFSA is using new options to secure permanent family settings for children.** After laying the groundwork for subsidized guardianship at the court and within CFSA, we fully implemented the program in FY03 and finalized 102 guardianships. Building on our FY02 performance, we also achieved another increase in adoptions, with a total of 315 in FY03. To improve support to adoptive parents, CFSA will open a new Adoption Resource Center this fall. A contractor will run this community-based center to provide information and services to a growing number of parents post-adoption.

3. **No children stay overnight at CFSA.** This past summer, at long last, CFSA put an end to the regrettable, and far too common, practice of children sleeping overnight in our building while waiting to be placed. We accomplished this change by identifying foster parents willing to take children around the clock in emergencies, instituting clearer management controls and accountability to support good placement decisions at any hour, and improving our emergency services after hours. Foster parents and providers used to drop off children at CFSA because they had no other way to get help in a crisis. We have changed this practice by clarifying our providers' responsibility to children and strengthening the supports we provide. Through an after-hours on-call program initiated last April, CFSA now provides prompt access to social workers and a supervisor at night and on weekends for urgent issues involving ongoing cases. With help from Clinical Practice and other support units, social work professionals either step in to avoid a placement disruption or act to place children promptly. This program especially supports foster parents, who can now get help from CFSA even outside regular business hours.

4. **CFSA is working to enhance the safety of District-based group-care facilities for youth.** For the 500 teens residing in group homes and independent living programs in the District, regulations now provide that these facilities are to meet basic health and safety standards. CFSA met the first-ever licensing deadlines for these facilities this year and thereby raised the bar for quality across programs for children. CFSA denied licenses to two providers. While these denials meant children had to move, the result was better placements for them. Many providers upgraded their facilities, while three providers voluntarily closed locations that they could not bring up to standards. Many providers

increased staff to meet child-staff ratio requirements or added more qualified staff, such as social workers at programs that had never had them. In regard to Hurricane Isabel, one provider told us, “As a direct result of newly imposed licensing standards, our residents fared much better than a lot of citizens in their neighborhoods.” He cited emergency lighting and an old-fashioned phone that plugs into the wall as invaluable.

5. **CFSA is seeking to enhance services for youth in District-based group care.** In August 2002, CFSA launched an initiative to align services we purchase from contractors more closely with our core values of safety, permanence, and well being. The first phase of this initiative involved developing and releasing a Request for Proposals for quality services for youth in congregate care that go beyond traditional room and board. On September 17, CFSA received 46 responses, which we are now evaluating. We expect to have new contracts in place early next year.

These five indicators paint a vastly different picture of what District foster children experience today compared to just a short time ago. Although CFSA’s placement process is still far from perfect, recognizing incremental improvements not only provides valuable lessons about what works but also fuels energy and hope. With each passing week that no child sleeps overnight at CFSA, we experience growing inspiration and resolve to do more. The District and CFSA must do better for abused and neglected children, we can do better, and—slowly but surely—we are doing better.

Performance Breakthroughs To Achieve the Vision

Over the coming months, we must build on these achievements to reach new levels of performance in several areas critical to effective child protection. We must translate the strengthened foundation of reduced individual caseloads, more accurate management information, and emerging improvements in children's lives into consistently better ways of working with children and families to achieve safety, permanence, and well being.

Achieving Permanence for Children

In the past, with too many cases and too few services, CFSA social workers focused on resolving immediate emergencies and striving to provide that children's temporary living arrangements, even if not long-term or stable, were safe. Today, with dramatic declines in individual caseloads and improvements in the quality of placements, it is possible to do much more. We must translate our goal for every child to grow up in a permanent family, whether through reunification, guardianship, or adoption, into reality for the thousands of children we serve. To make this happen, we must implement the following specific improvements.

- Provide that each child or family has a timely, high quality case plan, developed with input from the family and key resource people, as a road map for services and positive change.
- Visit children at home and in foster care more frequently and regularly.

- Support regular visits between birth parents and foster children who have a goal of reunification.
- Provide consistent training so that every social worker has the skills and support needed to engage parents, extended family, and resource families as participants in the child's well-being.
- Implement a reform strategy over the next year that requires social workers to meet with families, extended families, and resource people with community or clinical knowledge before removing a child or changing a child's placement. (In emergency situations, the meeting may take place the next business day.)

We have tracked the number of up-to-date case plans and visits since the end of the Receivership. While we have made dramatic progress, we have much more to do. Commitment to serving children, plus friendly competition between CFSA's two divisions of case-carrying social workers, have increased the number of in-home and foster care cases with case plans. Support in using FACES for outside providers with case management responsibility has also helped. But we must do more to provide that every child gets a plan promptly.

Similarly, reduced caseloads and better tracking have improved social worker visits to foster children 300 percent in the past 18 months. However, we cannot rest until we are seeing all children in care at least once every month—and by the end of the Implementation Plan, every week at the outset of a new placement and every two weeks thereafter.

In addition, two other reform initiatives will have a major impact on these practices. First, as part of the September 30 requirements under the Implementation Plan, CFSA developed a comprehensive training plan that builds on our major success over the past year in pre-service training and launches greater commitment to in-service training. In FY04, in-service training will focus on “blitzes” for managers, supervisors, social workers, and case aides to enhance the learning that takes place within an organization as people share approaches and experiences. To jumpstart this new practice, we will focus on issues that staff and outside observers have identified as top priorities, including Family Engagement and Case Planning.

Second, CFSA has launched an initiative to make Facilitated Family Team Meetings a standard operating procedure before every removal and placement change of a child—or on the next business day in the case of emergencies. While CFSA now conducts family meetings in some situations, experience around the country has shown that outcomes for children dramatically improve when they occur at the start of every case. These meetings give families a voice; unearth unexpected supports and resources in the extended family and community; speed the process of permanence for children, either at home or elsewhere; and ensure that social workers base decisions about removal on the best information available. Experts from both CFSA Clinical Practice and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are working with a team of volunteers from throughout our agency--and soon with external stakeholders as well--to incorporate Facilitated Family Team Meetings into our practices over the coming year.

Linking Services to the Community

Experience both within the District and around the country suggests that children and families do best when they are linked to strong supports, both formal and informal, in their own neighborhoods. Child protective agencies must work with communities and neighborhoods to provide truly meaningful support for families. CFSA plans to take two major steps on this path in the coming months:

- In collaboration with the Superior Court, we will initiate geographic assignment of new cases by January 1, 2004. Our two major divisions of case-carrying social workers will each be responsible for half of the city, receiving new cases where children have entered care from neighborhoods within their assigned geographic area. As a result, administrators and social workers in each division will develop a closer knowledge of and relationships with resources in the communities they're serving. The Superior Court will assign teams of judges in the same way, pairing half of its judicial teams with each of our geographic areas and enabling social workers to work more effectively with the Court as well.
- CFSA's collaboration with the Healthy Families/ Thriving Communities Collaboratives will be strengthened over the coming months by the increased FY04 investment spearheaded by the Human Services Committee. We have asked the Collaboratives to focus on key services best provided in the community, including intervention with troubled families, family visits, and support for young adults who have aged out of our system. Along with adequately funding the Collaboratives to provide these critical services, our goal is to align funding with neighborhoods where needs are greatest. We will work closely with the Collaboratives and

other community partners this year to flesh out a comprehensive community services strategy.

Building Strong Policies and Infrastructure

In the past, the District's child welfare program had few formal policies or procedures and lacked internal business processes. Over the past two years, CFSA has been working to create and strengthen policies and to establish systems and business processes that conform to District regulations and meet agency requirements. We must accelerate this process. The Final Implementation Plan requires us to implement performance-based contracting while keeping up with the day-to-day workload. In Medicaid revenue collection, our sense of urgency, which led to major performance improvements in FY03 and an ambitious agenda for FY04, is consistent with both the Final Implementation Plan and the District's broad reform agenda.

Promoting Youth Development

CFSA's Youth Development program supports teens, who currently make up almost half of all youngsters we serve. The high number of teens in the system reflects a historic lack of focus on seeking permanence for children. We expect to be raising lots of teens over the next several years even as we change our culture to make permanence a priority for all children. One major effort for the coming year is a project to identify and better prepare teens scheduled to age out of foster care. It seeks to ensure that each youth has a feasible, individualized plan for independence that includes new "after-care" support. In conjunction with the Healthy Families/ Thriving Community Collaboratives, CFSA will conduct community-based pre-emancipation conferences

to hear needs and concerns from the foster youth themselves and to develop sound plans for their future. Initial efforts are focusing on youth scheduled to age out within the next few months.

Recruiting Foster Parents

To develop more family options for placing children in their own communities, CFSA needs to recruit more foster homes in the District, especially in Wards 5, 6, 7, and 8. We are working to connect our recruiters with each neighborhood and community through both traditional and innovative strategies. For example, federal government employees working with the Council for Excellence in Government developed a geographical database of churches and faith-based organizations by Collaborative area and a form that people interested in fostering or adopting can fill out on the Internet. We are currently developing a formal, written recruitment plan, which will include traditional and innovative strategies for improved community outreach. We are also exploring the possibility of launching a targeted media campaign, possibly with assistance from foundations.

Conclusion

The steady support of the Council and the Mayor, along with the incredibly hard work of CFSA staff and our partners in the community and other District agencies, has enabled the District's public child protection program to sustain positive change for two years. While we share some themes with other child welfare reform initiatives underway throughout the nation, the District's specific approach has reflected its unique history and circumstances as a city, county, and state.

- In Stage 1, the District gutted its fragmented child welfare program and replaced it with CFSA, a **unified, accountable agency at the cabinet level**.
- Stage 2 involves your work in **establishing an improved legislative foundation and sustained funding** to support a strong **state and local** child protective system.
- Stage 3 is CFSA's ongoing work to **build an infrastructure** of trained staff, policies, best practices, management information, businesses processes, and internal and external relationships that will progressively result in improved outcomes for children and families.
- And finally, Stage 4 requires CFSA to **maintain the pace of change, demonstrate consistent positive results for children, and sustain political will and financial support for reform** over the long haul.

As experience in other urban areas has shown, child welfare reform is a long-term venture that requires diligence; passion; a sense of urgency; and recognition that while progress can be steady, it will also be incremental. I hope I've conveyed today that CFSA is making dramatic progress in some areas and slow, steady progress in others while still struggling uphill in many ways. I hope I've also shown that CFSA is in a better position now to meet the many monumental challenges ahead than we have ever been before. Both the Mayor and this Council have played instrumental roles in local child welfare reform so far. I look forward to your

continuing involvement and support, and I am deeply committed to being able to report more meaningful progress in children's lives each time we meet. Thank you.